

1/20/2009 Mark E. Fox

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# Speeches Honoring Abraham Lincoln

Mark Neely

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## LINCOLN AND LIBERTY IN THE CIVIL WAR

by Mark E. Neely, Jr.

It is one of the great ironies of American history, as Don Fehrenbacher has noted, that the President of the United States most often rated the greatest, Abraham Lincoln, was also the one most often accused of being a dictator. Having a paper on Lincoln and liberty in a series of lectures marking a landmark anniversary of the Constitution is very unusual, to say the least, and might seem to many people a little like inviting the fox into the henhouse.

In fact, in earlier commemorations of landmark anniversaries of the U. S. Constitution, the historical figure of Abraham Lincoln was conspicuous for its absence. At the centennial of the Constitution, in 1887, for example, his memory seems not to have been much in evidence. I could find no book or article written on the subject of Lincoln and the Constitution in that centennial year.

Fifty years later, in 1937, the American Historical Association marked the sesquicentennial of the Constitution at a great meeting in Philadelphia at the old Bellevue-Stratford Hotel--a memorable convocation which saw comments on the history of the Constitution by the likes of Charles Beard,

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THE FATE OF LINCOLN LITERATURE; PRESENTATION AT THE SOUTHERN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION, LOUISVILLE, NOVEMBER 1994.

by Mark E. Neely, Jr.

If someone had told me when I entered the Lincoln field twenty-three years ago that I would be here explaining why so much recent work deals with Ann Rutledge, I simply would not have believed him. I think I am here as a messenger of bad news, in that this field cannot report to the Association the sort of good news that we could if we were, say, a panel on the past, present, and future of Civil War scholarship. There, the application of new methods has brought successful results, a renaissance of history writing that may well equal or exceed the accomplishments of the Civil War centennial era. I do not think the Lincoln field is enjoying a similarly energetic revival. The famed \$50,000 Gettysburg Lincoln prize has never been given to a Lincoln book--it has turned to the Civil War field for its objects of praise. How on earth did this come about?

About a hundred years ago, the field emerged with two great traditions in writing about Abraham Lincoln. It began with people who had known Lincoln personally and well, and who wrote about him after his death because of their special knowledge. The one tradition comes from John G. Nicolay and John Hay; the other, from William H. Herndon.

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